Safeguarding in advocacy practice

Safeguarding is a core responsibility in advocacy work. Advocates play a vital role in recognising, reporting, and responding to safeguarding concerns, ensuring that clients remain safe and supported throughout the process. This guide provides advocates with essential steps for handling safeguarding issues effectively and compassionately, aligned with NICE guidelines [NG227], particularly sections on safeguarding [e.g., 1.3].

Identifying safeguarding concerns

Advocates need to remain vigilant for signs that a client may be at risk of harm. Safeguarding concerns may include abuse, neglect, exploitation, or self-neglect.

- **Recognising signs of abuse or neglect**: Be aware of physical signs (e.g., bruises, poor hygiene), behavioural changes (e.g., withdrawal, anxiety), and financial inconsistencies (e.g., sudden inability to pay bills). Trust your instincts—if something seems off, take it seriously. [NICE NG227, 1.3.3]

- **Considering the individual's circumstances**: Certain individuals may be at higher risk due to factors like isolation, cognitive impairment, or dependency on caregivers. Pay attention to any information suggesting the person is being mistreated or neglected. [NICE NG227, 1.3.4]

- **Listening to the person**: If an individual shares information that hints at a safeguarding issue, listen carefully, acknowledge their concerns, and remain non-judgmental. Encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings without pressuring them. [NICE NG227, 1.5.3]

Reporting safeguarding concerns

When a safeguarding concern arises, advocates have a responsibility to report it promptly, following both You Voice Counts and legal requirements.

- **Following organisational Safeguarding Policy**: Familiarise yourself with YVC's safeguarding policy and procedures. Always adhere to these guidelines, which outline the steps for raising safeguarding concerns responsibly. [NICE NG227, 1.3.6]

- **Documenting observations**: Record any safeguarding concerns thoroughly and objectively, using factual information rather than assumptions or interpretations. Include dates, descriptions of what you observed, and any statements from the client. [NICE NG227, 1.5.8]

- **Informing managers or the Designated Safeguarding Officer (DSO)**: Always communicate safeguarding concerns with your manager. They can provide support, ensure policies are followed, and help escalate the matter if needed. [NICE NG227, 1.5.9]

- **Making a referral**: If a safeguarding referral is necessary, submit it promptly and in line with local safeguarding procedures. Report the situation clearly to the safeguarding team, including relevant details about the client's circumstances and any immediate risks. [NICE NG227, 1.3.9]. Record the referral to the Safeguarding area in Charity Log and set the necessary follow-up actions.

Supporting clients through the safeguarding process

An advocate's role is to empower clients and provide support as they navigate safeguarding procedures. This support is particularly important in making sure clients understand and feel involved in decisions affecting their lives.

- **Explaining safeguarding**: If the client is aware of the safeguarding process, explain in straightforward terms what safeguarding involves, the steps that may follow, and the role of the safeguarding team. Be honest about the process and offer reassurance about their safety. [NICE NG227, 1.5.5]

- **Ensuring the person's voice is heard**: Advocates should support clients to share their views, wishes, and concerns with the safeguarding team. If the individual cannot communicate their views independently, represent their likely wishes based on previous conversations and interactions. [NICE NG227, 1.5.10]

- **Respecting the individual's autonomy**: While safeguarding may require intervention, it's essential to respect the client's autonomy and include them in decision-making wherever possible. Keep them informed of any steps taken and address any questions they may have. [NICE NG227, 1.3.5]

Handling complex safeguarding cases

Some safeguarding situations may involve heightened risk, complexity, or sensitive issues, requiring advocates to navigate them with care.

- **Consulting with managers on difficult cases**: For complex or high-risk situations, always consult with your manager to ensure the case is managed effectively and within policy guidelines. This consultation is essential for receiving guidance and determining the best course of action. [NICE NG227, 1.5.12]

- **Balancing confidentiality and safety**: In cases where there is a risk of harm, confidentiality may need to be balanced with the duty to report safeguarding concerns. Always prioritise the person's safety and wellbeing, while being transparent with them about when confidentiality cannot be maintained. [NICE NG227, 1.3.8]

- **Dealing with resistance or denial**: People may sometimes deny or downplay safeguarding concerns. In these cases, maintain a respectful and supportive approach, encouraging the individual to share their feelings. It's essential to be sensitive while ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address potential risks. [NICE NG227, 1.5.7]

Reflective practice for safeguarding in advocacy

Reflective practice helps advocates improve their safeguarding skills, enabling them to recognise, report, and respond to safeguarding concerns effectively.

- **Self-reflection questions**:
    - Did I remain objective and document the facts accurately?
    - Did I involve the person in the safeguarding process to the extent possible?
    - How did I manage any emotional reactions, and did I seek support if needed?
- **Supervision and team discussions**: Use supervision sessions to discuss complex safeguarding cases and gain insights from other advocates' experiences. Team discussions can help identify patterns in safeguarding cases and improve responses across the advocacy service. [NICE NG227, 1.5.11]

Key takeaways for advocates

- **Awareness and vigilance**: Stay alert for signs of abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- **Clear reporting and documentation**: Follow safeguarding policies, report concerns promptly, and document everything accurately.
- **Client empowerment and involvement**: Support clients to express their views and include them in decision-making wherever possible.
- **Reflective practice**: Regularly reflect on safeguarding cases to improve your skills and understanding.